

## *Why do students opt not to sit for SEC examinations at the end of their compulsory education?*

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### **Abstract**

In Malta, the number of female students registering for Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations at the end of their compulsory schooling consistently outnumbers that of male students, a higher percentage of female students register for Matriculation Certificate Examinations and acquire the Matriculation Certificate and more female students than male students start University courses and eventually graduate per academic year. Statistics available show relatively low numbers of students, especially male students engaging in further education and this led the Gender Issues Committee of the University of Malta to ask: why do some students opt not to participate in further education but to drop out of the system at the earliest opportunity? This prompted the Gender Issues Committee to embark on research attempting to answer this question. The study carried out with school guidance teachers and students who opted not to sit for any SEC examinations also sought to determine whether there were any differences

between reasons given by boys and those given by girls among other things. The results show that students who do not sit for any SEC examinations come mainly from Area Secondary Schools and the main reasons given were that the examinations are too difficult for them; that they do not like school; that they wished to stop studying; and that these students wanted seek employment. The dire necessity for higher levels of certification and the need for vocational courses at compulsory school level were among the conclusions reached through this study.

## Introduction

Compared to the other 27 EU countries, Malta ranked 12<sup>th</sup> with respect to closing the gender gap in Education as reported in the Global Gender Gap Report (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2007). This ranking is based on the ratio of female to male students enrolled in primary education, secondary education and tertiary education, together with the ratio of the female literacy rate to the male literacy rate. According to the report, Maltese female students outnumber male students at secondary and tertiary level. When considering other EU countries, the greater number of female students enrolled in tertiary education compared to male students seems to be a common trend although the gender gap in enrolment varies from country to country.

Locally, the number of female students registering for Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations at the end of their compulsory schooling consistently outnumbers that of male students (MATSEC, 2002b, 2003b, 2004b, 2005b, 2006b, 2006c, 2008b, 2009b), a higher percentage of female students register for Matriculation Certificate Examinations and acquire the Matriculation Certificate (MATSEC 2002a, 2003a, 2004a, 2005a, 2006a, 2007, 2008a, 2009a) and more female students than male students start University courses and eventually graduate per academic year (Gender Issues Committee, 2008).

Between 2001 and 2008, the percentage of students registering to sit for at least one subject at SEC level has overall increased by 8.8 %, with the highest percentage of registrations observed in 2007 at 80.5% of the 16-year-old cohort. Table 1 shows that in 2001 only 71.7% of the 16-year-olds registered for the examinations: 62.2% of the male cohort and 81.8% of the female 16-year-old cohort. Over the years, the percentage of female students registering increased by 3.6%, whereas that for males increased by 13.5%. While there is an encouraging increase in the number of registrations for both male and female students it is evident that male students are trailing behind. Overall, the percentage of male students registering for SEC examinations has shown a greater increase but it is still much lower than that of female students.

**Table 1: The percentage of cohort registering for examinations at SEC level 2001-2008**

| Year           | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Males</b>   | 62.2 | 69.4 | 69.8 | 71.1 | 74.8 | 75.8 | 77.1 | 75.8 |
| <b>Females</b> | 81.8 | 84.3 | 86.3 | 86.5 | 87.9 | 87.6 | 91.3 | 85.4 |
| <b>Total</b>   | 71.7 | 76.4 | 77.9 | 78.6 | 81.3 | 81.5 | 84.1 | 80.5 |

Table 2 shows that approximately twice as many male as female students fail to apply for any SEC examinations. Whilst the actual percentages have decreased between 2001 and 2008, the number of students within a cohort who do not apply for any SEC examinations is still high. On average, 28% of male students do not register for any SEC examinations. This implies that these students are leaving school without attempting to obtain a form of certification.

**Table 2: Percentage of cohort not registering for examinations at SEC level 2001-2008**

| Year           | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Males</b>   | 37.8 | 30.6 | 30.2 | 28.9 | 25.2 | 24.2 | 22.9 | 24.2 |
| <b>Females</b> | 18.2 | 15.7 | 13.7 | 13.5 | 12.1 | 12.4 | 8.7  | 14.6 |
| <b>Total</b>   | 28.3 | 23.6 | 22.1 | 21.4 | 18.7 | 18.5 | 15.9 | 19.5 |

During 2008, the gap between the number of male and female registrations was narrower but this was not due to an increase in the number of male registrations but due to an increase in the percentage of female students who did not register for any SEC level examinations (MATSEC, 2009b).

With no formal qualifications these students are unlikely to pursue further education. This is of great concern since as suggested by the European Commission (2007): “Young people who leave school with only lower secondary education are at a disadvantage on the labour market in today’s knowledge-based society” (p. 29). The situation is even bleaker than indicated by the statistics in Tables 1 and 2 since the number of registrations represented does not indicate the number of students who actually obtain qualifications. In fact each year an average of 7% of the

students who register for examinations do not pass in any of the subjects they sit for, that is they fail to obtain the minimum Grade 7 in even one subject (MATSEC 2006b, 2006c, 2008b, 2009b). Furthermore the registration statistics include students who register for one subject only, which certainly does not provide the entry requirements for further studies. In fact, for example, in the 2007 examination session, 40.2% of the 16-year-olds obtained passes in the core subjects necessary for entry to sixth-form colleges: 33.8% of the males and 46.8% of the females born in 1991 (MATSEC 2008b).

This makes Malta one of the nations trailing behind in the Lisbon Education Objectives for 2010 agreed by the member states (European Commission, 2007). Two of the objectives are mainly affected: that no more than 10% of the population aged 18-24 should leave secondary school with only lower secondary education or less and not be in education or training; and that at least 85% of young people should have completed upper secondary education. With no formal qualifications many students are unlikely to pursue further education.

A recent tracer study carried out by the Guidance and Counselling Services Unit of the Education Division (2007) amongst students who had completed the last year of secondary school (fifth-form) showed that 76% of the school leavers went on to further their education in a post-secondary school. This number has increased since 1990, when the percentage stood at 56%. The number of 16-year-old school leavers who start working has decreased significantly, from 31% to 13% between 1990 and 2007 (Guidance and Counselling Services, 2007) however the percentage is still undesirably high. A gender gap similar to that observed in SEC examination registrations was observed in this study: in 2007, 70% of male school leavers opted for further education compared to 80% of female school leavers, while 17% of the male school leavers opted to start working as opposed to 11% of the female school leavers. The tracer study also reported that the 665 male and female school leavers who started working found occupations as sales persons/shop assistants (147), waitresses/waiters (95), labourers (67), machine operators (62), cleaners (34) and masons/construction workers (34).

The gender gap observed in the number of examination registrations by male and female students at SEC level is replicated at higher levels. Table 3 shows the percentage of the 18-year-olds registering for the Matriculation Certificate Examinations between 2002 and 2008 with an

average difference in the percentage registrations between male and female students of about 15% (MATSEC 2003a, 2004a, 2005a, 2006a, 2007, 2008a, 2009a).

**Table 3: Percentage of cohort registering for the Matriculation Certificate**

| Year           | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Males</b>   | 20.8 | 22.4 | 24.6 | 25.5 | 26.0 | 27.0 | 25.3 |
| <b>Females</b> | 34.1 | 36.1 | 40.7 | 43.1 | 41.3 | 40.8 | 40.4 |
| <b>Total</b>   | 27.2 | 29.0 | 32.1 | 34.0 | 33.5 | 33.8 | 32.6 |

This gender gap is once again then reflected in the number of students acquiring the Matriculation Certificate and hence having the possibility of starting tertiary studies. In fact taking 2007 as an example, 29.8% of the 18-year-old female cohort obtained their Matriculation Certificate compared to 18.1% of the corresponding male cohort (MATSEC, 2008a).

A higher number of female students than male students go on to tertiary studies each year. Table 4 shows the number of male and female students graduating from the University of Malta between 1998 and 2007 (Gender Issues Committee, 2008).

**Table 4: Number of students graduating between 1998 and 2007**

| Year          | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|---------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Male</b>   | 778  | 962  | 842  | 917  | 921  | 936  | 1070 | 1105 | 1020 | 979  |
| <b>Female</b> | 904  | 1034 | 895  | 999  | 1072 | 1232 | 1644 | 1520 | 1380 | 1594 |
| <b>Total</b>  | 1682 | 1996 | 1737 | 1916 | 1993 | 2168 | 2714 | 2625 | 2400 | 2573 |

These statistics showing relatively low numbers of students, especially male students engaging in further education lead one to ask: why do some students opt not to participate in further education but to drop out of the system at the earliest opportunity? An early link in the chain of events represented by these statistics is the low participation of some students, especially male students, in SEC examinations and this prompted the Gender Issues Committee to embark on research attempting to answer the question: Why do some students opt not to sit for any SEC examinations?

### **Aims of the study**

Each year, a percentage of the school-leaving cohort has bleak employment opportunities, due to a lack of qualifications. The main aim of this study was to attempt to understand what is sustaining the observed trends related to students' participation in SEC examinations. The study attempted to answer the research questions listed below.

1. Why do students opt not to sit for any SEC examinations:
  - according to guidance teachers
  - according to the students themselves?
2. Are there any differences between reasons given by boys and those given by girls?
3. Are these students coming from a particular category of schools or are they coming from all types of schools?

### **Procedure**

The procedure adopted in order to collect data involved a number of steps and employed focus group discussions and the use of questionnaires as data collection methods. The main steps of the procedure are summarized below.

1. A focus group discussion was carried out with fifth-form boys from an Area Secondary School in February 2008. These students were not going to sit for any SEC examinations the following May. This focus group discussion was intended to help identify some areas to be explored through the study together with reasons to include in the questionnaire. A boys' Area Secondary School was chosen for this first focus group discussion because it was expected that a high proportion of the students not sitting for any examinations would be males from Area Secondary Schools. Area Secondary Schools cater for students who do not pass the selective 11+ examination.
2. In June 2008 a questionnaire was sent to all Guidance Teachers in charge of fifth-form students in State and non-State schools across Malta and Gozo, on possible reasons why students opt not to sit for SEC examinations. The questionnaire was sent in order to try to get an idea of how many students fall under the category of those who do not sit for any

examination from each type of school in a particular year. It was also intended to obtain reasons from the teachers' perspective.

3. Another three focus group discussions were carried out between October and November 2008, one at a Boys' Area Secondary School and two at a Girls' Area Secondary School. These focus group discussions provided further feedback on students' views which were used to construct the questionnaire statements. These discussions also provided some depth to the study by means of comments which students provided.
4. Based on the responses obtained from the focus group discussions and teachers' questionnaires, a student questionnaire was constructed.
5. In November 2008 the questionnaire was administered to students from different schools in Malta and Gozo who were not going to sit for any SEC examinations. The questionnaire provided in Maltese and English contained a list of reasons why students may opt not to sit for any SEC examinations. The respondents were required to tick the reasons which were relevant to their situation.

## Results

### Responses from Guidance Teacher Questionnaire

A total of 35 questionnaires were received out of 59 sent out. Table 5 shows the number and types of schools responding.

**Table 5: Number and Types of Schools returning Guidance Teacher questionnaire**

|                       |                                  | Boys'<br>Schools | Girls'<br>Schools | Total |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------|
| <b>Area Secondary</b> | Number of schools that responded | 9                | 2                 | 11    |
|                       | Number of schools in Malta       | 10               | 7                 | 17    |
| <b>Junior Lyceum</b>  | Number of schools that responded | 4                | 2                 | 6     |
|                       | Number of schools in Malta       | 8                | 6                 | 14    |
| <b>Church School</b>  | Number of schools that responded | 7                | 6                 | 13    |
|                       | Number of schools in Malta       | 10               | 11                | 21    |
| <b>Independent</b>    | Number of schools that responded |                  |                   | 4     |



|                |                            |  |  |   |
|----------------|----------------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>School*</b> | Number of schools in Malta |  |  | 9 |
|----------------|----------------------------|--|--|---|

\* The Independent schools that responded were all Co-Educational.

Of the thirty-five schools, fourteen reported that all their students sit for SEC level examinations, although as one school pointed out, they do not all necessarily pass. These included three Independent Schools, four Boys' Church Schools, four Girls' Church schools, two Girls' Junior Lyceums and one Boys' Junior Lyceum. Five schools said that each had one student who did not apply for any SEC examinations because of special needs. These were one Independent school, one Girls' Church school and three Boys' Church schools. Sixteen schools reported that they had a number of students who did not apply for any examinations for other reasons. Altogether, the schools responding reported that 292 students would not be applying for SEC examinations.

Table 6 shows the distribution of students not sitting for SEC examinations. It is evident that most students who opt not to sit for any SEC examinations attend State Area Secondary Schools. Students who do not pass the selective 11+ examination for entry to State Junior Lyceums attend these schools. The other types of schools (Junior Lyceums and non-State schools) report very few cases of students who opt to finish compulsory schooling with no formal certification.

**Table 6: Distribution of students not sitting for SEC examinations**

| Type of School        | Number of Schools | Number of students |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Boys' Junior Lyceum   | 3                 | 8                  |
| Boys' Area Secondary  | 9                 | 239                |
| Girls' Area Secondary | 2                 | 43                 |
| Girls' Church School  | 1                 | 2                  |

Guidance teachers provided a number of reasons why students opt not to sit for any examinations. These are summarized in Table 7.

**Table 7: Reasons given by Guidance teachers**

| Reason   | Number |
|--|--------|
| Examinations are too difficult for these students      | 14     |
| They do not like school                                | 11     |
| Students wish to stop studying                         | 10     |
| Reading and writing difficulties                       | 9      |
| Students want to start working                         | 9      |
| Students already started working                       | 8      |
| Their family does not expect them to do well or pass   | 5      |
| Examinations are a waste of money                      | 5      |
| Students feel they do not need to sit for examinations | 5      |
| Peer influences  | 3      |
| Health problems  | 2      |
| Family does not want them to sit for examinations      | 1      |
| Family members have health problems                    | 1      |
| Students will sit for examinations next academic year  | 1      |

The most common reasons given by the schools were that *‘Examinations are too difficult’*, *‘not liking school’*, *‘Students wish to stop studying’*, *‘Reading and writing difficulties’*, *‘Students want to start working’* and *‘Students already started working’*. These reasons raise two important points: the unsuitability of the examinations in question for the needs and abilities of these students and students’ eagerness to get out of the school system and start working.

Some guidance teachers elaborated these points when writing additional comments:

School 25 (Boys’ Area Secondary School): If exams were more student-friendly (more practical), this decreases. School system does not appeal (too much theory). They leave Form Five lacking writing/reading skills. Family businesses tend to attract them to work.

School 10 (Boys’ Church School): We should present different curricula for different abilities and include vocational choices in our Matriculation system.

School 25 (Boys' Area Secondary School): These students just cannot be listed as failures because when they are in a good setting, provided with good tools, they produce wonderful results! Written exams may be hindering possible careers.

School 26 (Boys' Area Secondary School): Can the school leaving certificate be combined with the SEC so that as much as possible, most students will have the opportunity to sit for a more graded exam?

It is evident that for these guidance teachers one of the reasons why students leave school without attempting to obtain a form of certification is because the examinations are beyond the abilities of the students and require skills such as reading and writing that are acting as barriers for these students. The introduction of vocational subjects and methods of assessment which rely less on writing are hence suggested. One teacher commented that the fact that the SEC examinations have two tiers (Paper A and Paper B options) is encouraging for some students:

School 30 (Boys' Area Secondary School): The fact that there is Paper A and Paper B encourages students to take up exams.

but for other students the Paper B option is still beyond their reach. These comments are of concern since they imply that students are spending 11 years at school and are leaving school without the reading and writing skills required to answer examination papers. Some guidance teachers gave reasons why this situation is possible:

School 29 (Girls' Church School): I think that students do not sit for their SEC exams because of the Education System. Students who fail their final exams are promoted to the next form whether they pass or not. If they keep on failing one year after another and they keep on being promoted it stands to reason that the students feel that they are not able to make it through their SEC exams.

School 32 (Low achievers' School): The students' problems are usually noted during the Primary Education years and it is at this level that help and support is to be given. At the Secondary Education stage they receive attention and encouragement by the teaching staff, but it seems that their difficulties can't be solved.

Another reason given by guidance teachers is that these students do not feel the need to acquire certification. This may be due to the low value they attribute to education or because of the existence of courses with no entry requirements that they can take up:

School 26 (Boys' Area Secondary School): They do not acknowledge the need of certification. Some of them do not even attend for their annual exams.

School 3 (Boys' Area Secondary School): Some students know that they can find work or further their studies at MCAST without SEC exams.

School 30 (Boys' Area Secondary School): The fact that certain courses at MCAST (Foundation Year) and ITS (as an ETC student) no O-levels are necessary makes certain pupils decide to take the easy (but longer) way out.

School 3 (Boys' Area Secondary School): If MCAST continues to accept students without SEC exams, then there is no point in trying to persuade these students to sit for their exams, they become pointless.

Other reasons given by guidance teachers indicate students' low self esteem, their family's low expectations, and the need or desire to start working:

School 18 (Boys' Area Secondary School): Low-self esteem

School 32 (School for low achievers): They have low self-esteem and are low-achievers. They have difficulties regarding common-core subjects. Most of them don't have support from the family. Most of them want to earn money as soon as possible.

School 3 (Boys' Area Secondary School): There is an annual increase in students not sitting for SEC. This school is catering for students with more social, emotional and behavioural difficulties than before.

As shown by these comments, low self esteem is particularly evident in certain types of schools. According to the National Curriculum Council Secondary Education Focus Group (2004) the selection of high achievers for Junior Lyceums and some Boys' Church Schools automatically selects and labels the low achievers. This results in schools in which the

predominant ethos is likely to be one of failure and rejection. Inevitably this has a negative influence on the students' self-esteem and on their teachers' expectations. Self-esteem has often been declared to be the most accurate predictor of future performance, even stronger than intelligence. Students from these schools need more encouragement than others in order to start believing in their abilities:

School 30 (Boys' Area Secondary School): Ex fifth-formers who attended our school and had success are an encouragement to our pupils.

### Students' views

Schools were contacted once again in November 2008 as during this month students register for their SEC examinations. Thirty-nine of the 54 eligible schools contacted replied. Table 8 shows the registration information obtained from the 39 schools responding.

**Table 8: SEC registration information according to type of school in November 2008**

| Type of School        | All students sitting for SEC | Only students with special needs not sitting | Students not sitting for SEC |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
|                       | Number of schools            | Number of schools                            | Number of schools            |
| Area Secondary Boys'  | 0                            | 0  | 9                            |
| Area Secondary Girls' | 0                            | 0  | 6                            |
| Junior Lyceum Boys'   | 2                            | 0  | 1                            |
| Junior Lyceum Girls'  | 3                            | 1  | 0                            |
| Church Boys'          | 4                            | 2  | 0                            |
| Church Girls'         | 3                            | 2  | 1                            |
| Independent           | 4                            | 1  | 0                            |

The 17 schools with students not sitting for any SEC examinations were contacted and invited to participate in the study. A total of 105 students from 17 different schools answered the questionnaire: 78 boys and 27 girls. A high level of absenteeism was observed with students who would not be sitting for SEC examinations. This explains the low number of questionnaires collected: many students were not at school when the questionnaires were distributed and filled

by the students. This high level of absenteeism in itself is an important finding of this study: students were either not sitting for any SEC examinations because their attendance to school was not regular or students were not attending school because there were no examinations/certificates to prepare for. This problem of absenteeism has been reported elsewhere. For example, Mifsud (1995) reports that absenteeism is very common, and is related to poor educational attainment. However, it is unclear whether poor educational attainment is a result of absenteeism, or whether students miss school because they feel it is a waste of time, and do not bother attending, as some expressed during the focus group discussions:

“Why should I bother coming? I do not understand what’s going on. I come here to get annoyed. I’d rather be out.”

Teachers teaching these students often comment about how difficult it is to teach these classes because it is difficult to build a lesson on previous work done since from lesson to lesson the audience changes.

The questionnaire was written in Maltese but an English version was also available. Each statement in the questionnaire was numbered and was read out to the students. Students were requested to tick the statements that applied to their situation. Table 9 shows the responses chosen by the students in order of frequency.

**Table 9: Reasons chosen by the students in order of frequency**

|   | Number | %    |
|---|--------|------|
| I find exams too difficult                                | 83     | 79.1 |
| I know I am not going to pass                             | 77     | 73.3 |
| I want to start working so that I can save money          | 71     | 67.6 |
| The syllabus is too difficult                             | 65     | 61.9 |
| I want to start working so that I can have spending money | 61     | 58.1 |
| I am fed up of school                                     | 56     | 53.3 |
| I want to start working so that I can be independent      | 52     | 49.5 |
| I do not wish to continue studying                        | 50     | 47.6 |
| I know others who did not pass exams                      | 50     | 47.6 |
| It is too competitive                                     | 46     | 43.8 |

|   |    |      |
|---|----|------|
| I want to start working so that I can help my family                | 36 | 34.3 |
| My family do not think I will pass                                  | 35 | 33.3 |
| My teachers do not think I will pass                                | 35 | 33.3 |
| Studying is a waste of time   | 32 | 30.5 |
| Exams are a waste of money  | 30 | 28.6 |
| Qualifications lead to work which does not appeal to me             | 29 | 27.6 |
| I want to leave school so that I can help at home                   | 28 | 26.7 |
| No one in my family furthered their studies                         | 27 | 25.7 |
| I do not need a SEC certificate to find work                        | 25 | 23.8 |
| The course I wish to follow does not require qualifications         | 25 | 23.8 |
| The job I wish to do does not require qualifications                | 23 | 21.9 |
| Qualifications are no longer useful as too many people possess them | 21 | 20.0 |
| I am going to sit for SEC exams next year                           | 16 | 15.2 |
| I cannot afford to pay for the exams                                | 14 | 13.3 |
| My family does not want me to sit for exams                         | 14 | 13.3 |
| I want to leave school so that I can start a family                 | 13 | 12.4 |
| I have health problems and cannot continue attending school         | 9  | 8.6  |

Among the most popular responses, one can observe a number indicating the students' concern that the level of the examination does not match their level of ability: 'I find exams too difficult', 'I know I am not going to pass', 'The syllabus is too difficult'. These responses echo the guidance teachers' comments and concerns that although the SEC examinations cater for students with a wide range of abilities, they do not cater for all students. Part of the 'difficulty' involved in these examinations could very well be due to poor reading and writing skills exhibited by some students. These responses are also showing students' low self-esteem reported by guidance teachers. This may be illustrated further by a comment made by a 16-year-old boy in one of the focus group discussions:

16-year-old boy: "I know a student who sat for all of them, and didn't pass any! And he was intelligent! I'm not going to sit for any, what's the point? If this boy was intelligent and did not get a single one!"

High up in the list of responses selected are those dealing with students' wish to start working in order to obtain financial independence: 'I want to start working so that I can save money', 'I want to start working so that I have spending money', 'I want to start working so that I can be independent' were selected by 67.6%, 58.1% and 49.5% of the respondents respectively. These responses seem to indicate that the students are coming from particular socioeconomic backgrounds but no further information is available on the issue. Another commonly selected option was: 'I want to start working so that I can help my family', chosen by 34.3% of the respondents, which seems to confirm that conclusion. A very specific reason for wanting to leave school as soon as possible and start working was given by a 15-year-old girl during the focus group discussions:

15-year-old girl: "I want to start a family. To do that, I need money. I need to buy a house, so I need to start working. The sooner I finish [school] the better, so I can start [working]!"

For those students who would like to start working, school, examinations and certificates are of no use, according to their responses. The Guidance Teachers had also pointed out that many of the students who opt not to sit for any SEC examinations do not feel the need for any certification at the end of secondary school. This was confirmed by a number of responses selected by students indicating their conviction that they do not need the qualifications. In fact 23.8% of the respondents opted for the statement 'I do not need a SEC certificate to find work'; another 23.8% opted for the statement 'The course I wish to follow does not require qualifications'; while 21.9% were of the opinion that 'The job I wish to do does not require qualifications'. Some students (27.6%) were also of the opinion that having qualifications would actually lead to work which does not appeal to them! Of particular concern is the evidence suggesting that for many students the fact that there are basic post-secondary courses with no entry requirements implies that there is no need to attend school, study and sit for any SEC examination. During the focus group discussions one particular student had an interesting view to share:

15-year-old girl: "So many people go to school today and get qualifications that they don't mean anything anymore because everyone has them. It is better to have work experience, because people are taking longer to start work".



Another observation evident from the responses is related to students' feelings about school and studying. In fact 53.3% of the students selected 'I am fed up of school' while 47.6% chose 'I do not wish to continue studying'. For the guidance teachers participating in this study, the fact that these students do not like school and that they do not like studying were among the main reasons why some students opt not to sit for any examinations at SEC level. This is further confirmed by another reason commonly chosen by students: 'Studying is a waste of time', selected by 30.5% of the students participating in this study.

A surprising number of students, (13% of the respondents), claim that they did not sit for any SEC examinations because they cannot afford to pay for the examinations. This claim was made despite the possibility of waiving of fees for such cases. According to a report published by the Ministry of Social Policy (2008) in 2008, 485 applications for the waiving of the MATSEC Examination SEC level fees were accepted. It seems however, that not all students are aware of this possibility.

Guidance Teachers had also pointed out the need of vocational courses for students who were still under compulsory school age. This point was brought up by the students during focus group discussions. They stressed the need of learning other skills, especially practical skills:

16-year-old boy: "Your certificate does not show whether you can hammer a nail properly or not. It just shows how well you write. A carpenter or a mechanic does not want to know that. Closing the trade schools was wrong, because it makes it harder to find a job, not having some training in a trade".

15-year-old boy: "Kids whose father works in a trade are lucky. They know that they've got a job, and that they are going to be taught!"

One of the aims of this study was to determine whether there are any differences between reasons for not sitting for SEC examinations given by boys and those given by girls. In order to attempt to answer this question, the statements were analysed separately according to gender. Table 10 shows the responses selected by the 78 male students participating in this study, arranged in order of frequency.

Table 10: Reasons selected by male students

| Reasons   | Number | %    |
|---|--------|------|
| I find exams too difficult  | 57     | 73.1 |
| I want to start working so that I can save money                    | 52     | 66.7 |
| I know I am not going to pass                                       | 50     | 64.1 |
| The syllabus is too difficult                                       | 46     | 59.0 |
| I am fed up of school   | 44     | 56.4 |
| I want to start working so that I have spending money               | 44     | 56.4 |
| I do not wish to continue studying                                  | 36     | 46.2 |
| I want to start working so that I can be independent                | 36     | 46.2 |
| It is too competitive   | 35     | 44.9 |
| I know others who did not pass the exam                             | 35     | 44.9 |
| Studying is a waste of time   | 27     | 34.6 |
| I want to start working so that I can help my family                | 26     | 33.3 |
| I want to leave school so that I can help at home                   | 25     | 32.1 |
| Exams are a waste of money  | 25     | 32.1 |
| My family do not think I will pass                                  | 25     | 32.1 |
| Qualifications lead to work which does not appeal to me             | 24     | 30.8 |
| I do not need a SEC certificate to find work                        | 23     | 29.5 |
| My teachers do not think I will pass                                | 21     | 26.9 |
| The work I wish to follow does not require qualifications           | 20     | 25.6 |
| The course I wish to follow does not require qualifications         | 20     | 25.6 |
| Qualifications are no longer useful as too many people possess them | 18     | 23.1 |
| No one in my family furthered their studies                         | 16     | 20.5 |

|   |    |      |
|---|----|------|
| My family does not want me to sit for the exams             | 14 | 18.0 |
| I cannot afford to pay for the exams                        | 13 | 16.7 |
| I want to leave school so that I can start a family         | 12 | 15.4 |
| I am going to sit for SEC exams next year                   | 12 | 15.4 |
| I have health problems and cannot continue attending school | 9  | 11.5 |

The reasons chosen by male students roughly follow the same order shown by the whole population taken together, with the concern that the examinations/syllabus are too difficult for them and evidence of low self-esteem shown in the reasons that were most frequently selected. Three statements related to this concern were each chosen by 59-73% of the male respondents.

The statements related to the need or wish to start working for financial reasons were also frequently chosen. In fact the three statements related to this issue were each chosen by 46-67% of the male population.

Another observation that can be made regards the statement: 'I cannot afford to pay for the exams'. Earlier in this section it was observed that 14 out of the 105 respondents stated that they could not afford to pay for the examinations showing that they were not aware of the possibility of waiving of examination fees for candidates with financial difficulties. As shown in Table 10, 13 of the students selecting this statement were boys, showing a greater lack of information in boys than in girls. Even if parents or students are not aware of this opportunity, this information should be readily available in schools.

A similar analysis can be shown for the female respondents participating in this study. Only 27 girls filled the questionnaire so limited conclusions may be drawn relating the whole female population. Table 11 shows the reasons selected by female respondents listed according to frequency.

**Table 11: Reasons selected by female students**

|   | Number | %    |
|---|--------|------|
| I know I am not going to pass                                       | 27     | 100  |
| I find exams too difficult  | 26     | 96.3 |
| I want to start working so that I can save money                    | 19     | 70.4 |
| The syllabus is too difficult                                       | 19     | 70.4 |
| I want to start working so that I have spending money               | 17     | 63.0 |
| I want to start working so that I can be independent                | 16     | 59.3 |
| I know others who did not pass the exam                             | 15     | 55.6 |
| My teachers do not think I will pass                                | 14     | 51.9 |
| I do not wish to continue studying                                  | 14     | 51.9 |
| I am fed up of school   | 12     | 44.4 |
| It is too competitive   | 11     | 40.7 |
| No one in my family furthered their studies                         | 11     | 40.7 |
| I want to start working so that I can help my family                | 10     | 37.0 |
| My family do not think I will pass                                  | 10     | 37.0 |
| Studying is a waste of time   | 5      | 18.5 |
| Exams are a waste of money  | 5      | 18.5 |
| Qualifications lead to work which does not appeal to me             | 5      | 18.5 |
| The course I wish to follow does not require qualifications         | 5      | 18.5 |
| I am going to sit for SEC exams next year                           | 4      | 14.8 |
| I want to leave school so that I can help at home                   | 3      | 11.1 |
| The work I wish to follow does not require qualifications           | 3      | 11.1 |
| Qualifications are no longer useful as too many people possess them | 3      | 11.1 |
| I do not need a SEC certificate to find work                        | 2      | 7.4  |
| I cannot afford to pay for the exams                                | 1      | 3.7  |
| I want to leave school so that I can start a family                 | 1      | 3.7  |
| My family does not want me to sit for the exams                     | 0      | 0    |
| I have health problems and cannot continue attending school         | 0      | 0    |

When taking the responses selected by female students, it is evident that the same reasons selected by male students appear to be prominent in the case of female students. One interesting observation, however, is the general popularity of the reasons pointing towards low self-esteem: the statements: ‘I know I am not going to pass’ and ‘I find examinations difficult’ were chosen by all the girls and by 26 out of 27 respondents respectively. The statement: ‘The syllabus is too difficult’ was selected by 70.4% of the female respondents. These percentages are considerably higher than the percentages of male students selecting the same reasons.

Again in the case of female students, the reasons related to starting work for financial reasons are high up in the list of statements that were most frequently selected. In fact the statements ‘I want to start working so that I can save money’, ‘I want to start working so that I have spending money’ and ‘I want to start working so that I can be independent’ were selected by 70.4%, 63% and 59.3% of the female respondents respectively.

It seems that there are no big differences between reasons selected by male students for not sitting for SEC examinations and reasons selected by female students but overall it seems that these factors affect boys more than girls since a higher percentage of boys than girls are opting not to sit for SEC examinations.

## **Discussion**

The study intended to determine reasons why some students opt not to sit for SEC examinations; whether there are differences in reasons given by boys and those given by girls; and whether these students were coming from a particular school sector.

The results have shown that students who do not sit for any SEC examinations come mainly from Area Secondary Schools.

According to the Guidance Teachers the main reasons why students opt not to sit for SEC examinations are that the examinations are too difficult for these students; that these students do not like school; they wish to stop studying; these students have reading and writing difficulties and also because these students want to start working. The same reasons were also given by the students themselves who in addition pointed out that courses or jobs they intend to take up do not require entry qualifications. It seems that students are concerned about their futures, but feel that

education is not an option for them, either because they do not feel they can succeed within this system, or because they are not going to achieve what they want by staying in school.

Other observations made through this study include the high level of absenteeism of students in Area Secondary Schools who were not sitting for examinations, the low self-esteem shown by these students with respect to their abilities in academic subjects and the students' frustration about the lack of opportunity for vocational training up to compulsory school age. All these reasons and observations could be closely related. Most students who opt not to sit for SEC examinations attend Area Secondary Schools, schools they attend because they have been declared failures in academic subjects at age 11. This no doubt contributes extensively to their low self-esteem when it comes to school subjects. However they still have to follow an academic programme with subjects that they have been declared to be no good at. The syllabi are in many cases the same as those for higher ability students. The Guidance Teachers also pointed out cases where students with reading and writing difficulties are promoted from year to year such that they end up in the higher forms with difficulties that were not tackled early enough. Ideally, students should not be allowed to reach school leaving age without having basic numerical and literacy skills. Help should be available as early as possible in primary schools. In fact, such measures are already in place, for example, after-school literacy clubs in primary schools.

In such situations it is hardly surprising to find that these students do not like school, want to stop studying and want to do things that they may be good at, such as following vocational courses, learning a trade or starting to work.

In a study comparing emotional and behavioural problems of students aged 12 and 14 from different Area Secondary schools carried out by Bonnici, Farrugia and Micallef (1999), students reported that they felt a sense of alienation and irrelevance at school. Students explained that the course material was not of importance to them. Furthermore, the learning environments were inappropriate, which continued to enhance their sense of worthlessness. Theuma (1997) studied attitudes and perceptions of 187 Area Secondary School students aged 12 to 14. Theuma reported that over 82% of the students participating in the study did not like studying. In fact, this was their major concern regarding school. Nearly 75% of the participants were not interested in some of the subjects they were learning. It is also significant that over one fifth of the students said that they felt uncomfortable speaking up in class when they had a difficulty.

Sultana (1989, 1996) has a number of explanations for these observations. He suggests that whilst education is free for all, the effects of social class are still to be felt on educational attainment. Students of different social backgrounds end up in different schools and as a result, their occupational outcomes are predetermined. Sultana (1996) also feels that the curricula do not reflect the ‘voices and experiences of all groups in Maltese society’ (p. 121). Therefore, the underrepresented groups are at greater risk of being labelled as underachievers, since they cannot relate to the learning context. According to Sultana, the Maltese Educational system is based on the premise that children are either capable of learning, or they are not. The teaching methods and tools for measuring student achievement are not questioned. It is assumed that children have to fit within the standards set out for them. Educational institutions are not adequately catering for different learning needs of students. Students are therefore ‘blamed’ for under-achievement. Sultana (1996) argues that the environment in which learning takes place should be examined. Follow up studies could therefore investigate what pedagogies might be better suited to students from different backgrounds and with different learning abilities.

Some guidance teachers noted that schools were not adapting to students’ learning abilities and needs, nor were they able to cater for the increasing number of students with social and emotional problems, including self esteem. It is of paramount importance that students’ difficulties are diagnosed and tackled as early as possible. Guidance teachers are aware of the challenges facing students, but know that schools do not have human or financial resources to deal with them. Similar concerns were shown in the National Curriculum Council Secondary Education Focus Group (2004) and Pierrien Grima (2004).

The findings of this study also show that students, families and teachers do not have high expectations for these students. According to Sultana (1996), this attitude is seriously detrimental to students.

The reasons for opting not to sit for examinations given by boys were very similar to those given by girls. It seems that factors related to self-worth, difficulty of the examinations, dislike of school and school work, and the need or wish to start working affect both boys and girls but they seem to affect boys more than girls since a higher percentage of boys are leaving school without any certification.

Students and guidance teachers stressed the fact that the SEC examinations were beyond the abilities of some students. This begs the introduction of a level of certification of basic competencies for which lower ability students can aspire and work for. In the report MATSEC: Strengthening a National Examination System (2005) a number of recommendations were made, in particular "... the introduction of a computerised examination system certifying functional competencies in ... Maltese, English, Mathematics, Science and IT... Each subject would have three consecutive levels of competencies and students should be given a certificate after the completion of each level ..." (p. 95). If this recommendation is implemented, students may be motivated to attend school and work for such qualifications. Another recommendation made in the same report also relates the findings of this study: "MATSEC should aim to offer a number of vocational subjects for certification in the near future" (p. 94). The fact that certification was limited to academic subjects only was a weak point in our current system according to students and guidance teachers. Again, the introduction of vocational subjects and vocational qualifications at compulsory school level would attract more students and encourage more students to attend school and work for these qualifications.

Another point of concern revealed by this study was the existence of a number of MCAST courses with no entry requirements. While this is beneficial as it provides a source of further education for those students who fail to acquire certificates for SEC examinations, it may also lead other students not to bother about school and examinations knowing that they can still get into a post-secondary institution.

## **Conclusion**

Since SEC exams are the only official and local qualifications available in Malta, students' prospects greatly depend on the results obtained. By choosing not to sit for any SEC examinations, students have limited their future options. It is therefore necessary to understand what has led students, their families and teachers to this decision. The findings of this study can help us to identify and to attempt to remove barriers and create opportunities that will help motivate students and schools alike.



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